

The Interpreter

Is the World Really Falling Apart, or Does It Just Feel That Way?

By most measures — with one glaring exception — people around the world are better off than ever. So why doesn't it feel that way, especially to Americans?



Jason Andrew for The New York Times

By [Max Fisher](#) July 12, 2022

Has the world entered a time of unusual turbulence, or does it just feel that way?

Scanning the headlines, it's easy to conclude that something has broken. [The pandemic](#). Accelerating crises from climate change. Global [grain shortage](#). [Russia's war on Ukraine](#). Political and economic meltdown [in Sri Lanka](#). A former prime minister's [assassination](#) in Japan. And, in the United

States: [inflation](#), [mass shootings](#), a [reckoning](#) over Jan. 6 and collapsing [abortion rights](#).

That sense of chaos can be difficult to square with longer-term data showing that, on many metrics, the world is generally becoming better off.

War is [rarer today](#), by some measures, than it has been for most of the past 50 years — and, when it does occur, is [significantly](#) less [deadly](#). Genocides and mass atrocities are [less common all the time](#), too. [Life expectancy](#), [literacy](#) and standards of living have all risen to historic highs.

Also steadily declining in recent decades: [hunger](#), [child mortality](#), and [extreme poverty](#), liberating hundreds of millions from what are, by sheer numbers, among the pre-eminent threats facing humanity.

So why does it often feel like, despite all the data, things are only getting worse?

There are a few reasons for this seeming disparity — some more reassuring than others — not to mention one important measure: the state of democracy, by which the world is not improving at all.

Subtle Gains Versus Obvious Crisis

The ways in which the world is most significantly improving tend to be gradual, unfolding over generations.

Hundreds of millions might live healthier and safer lives than their parents did. But those often subtle changes will lift entire societies at a time, making it harder for individuals to notice the change.

We tend to judge how we are doing compared to those around us, or compared to our own recent past — not compared to abstract benchmarks or previous generations.

And many of the positive changes are about prevention. No one notices the wars that don't happen, the family members who aren't claimed by disease, the children who don't die in infancy.

Still, try visiting a society in turmoil — Hong Kong amid encroaching authoritarianism, say, or Lebanon in economic free-fall — and telling people that they live in an age of rising well-being and receding threats. You are likely to be met with incredulous glares.



Police officers standing guard in front of the closed Victoria Park in Hong Kong in June in anticipation of the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

And thanks to the internet, with news consumption far greater than it once was, even those who live far from crises now live in a digital world of constant, dire updates. A major story, like a mass shooting or the war in Ukraine, can feel ever-present in our lives.

If your social media feeds and home screens serve up a steady stream of calamities, they can feed an overwhelming — if sometimes misplaced — sense of threat, as if the world itself were caving in.

When people express that they're feeling as if the world is falling apart, they are not talking about long-view metrics like life expectancy. Rather, they tend to sense that humanity is besieged by upheaval and emergencies to a degree that it has not been before.

But there is an argument, albeit one that would only comfort an economist, that today's crises are both rarer and less severe than those of even the recent past.

Consider the mid-1990s, a time that Americans tend to remember as one of global stability and optimism. If today were really a time of exceptional turmoil, then surely that world would look better in comparison?

In reality, the opposite is true. The mid-1990s saw genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia. Years of war in Europe amid Yugoslavia's collapse. Devastating famines in Sudan, Somalia and North Korea. Civil wars in over a dozen countries. Crackdowns and coups too numerous to mention.

Such events were in fact more common in the 1990s than today. Prior decades were, in most ways, even worse.



Carrying the coffins of victims of the Srebrenica massacre from the Battery Factory at Potocari in Bosnia and Herzegovina to their burial places in a nearby cemetery in July 2016. Andrew Testa for The New York Times

But you are unlikely to remember every decades-old disaster as vividly as you might be able to recount, say, a terror attack or political crisis from this week.

And reductions in such crises have only reduced the world's problems, not erased them. No one wants to cheer a famine that is less severe than it might have been in the past, especially not the families whom it puts at risk, and especially knowing that future conflicts or climate-related crises could always cause another.

Uneven Optimism

Still, the feeling that the world is getting worse is not universal. In fact, it is mostly held by residents of rich countries like the United States.

[Survey](#) after [survey](#) has found that a majority of people in low-income and middle-income countries like Kenya or Indonesia tend to express optimism about the future, for both themselves and their societies.

Such countries represent most of the world's population, suggesting that optimism is, believe it or not, the prevailing global mood.

Those countries, after all, are where those long-term gains in health and well-being are most pronounced.



A traditional market in Papua, Indonesia, last year. Ulet Ifansasti for The New York Times

Many of these regions also experienced decades of civil conflict and unrest during the Cold War, when the United States and Soviet Union treated them as battlegrounds, propping up despots and insurgents.

But these same surveys also tend to find that in wealthy countries, most respondents express pessimism about the future.

Much of this may come down to economic mobility, rather than global headlines. People in low-income countries tend to believe they will be better off financially in the future, whereas those in wealthy countries consider it unlikely.

But pessimism about one's personal circumstances can easily become pessimism about the world.

[Polls in the United States](#) have found that people who see little hope of personal financial advancement also feel the country as a whole is getting worse, and disapprove of political leaders. The erosion of secure working-

class jobs, as manufacturing work flees overseas and labor unions wither, is thought to have precipitated much of the West's populist backlash.

It's little wonder, in this view, that Americans saw the 1990s as a time of global peace and prosperity — even if this was mostly just a time of peace and prosperity for Americans.

But stalled economic fortunes are hardly the only reason for pessimism in wealthy countries.

For all the metrics that show steady improvement in the world, there is one on which the world really is facing a dramatic and destabilizing erosion: democracy.

An Era of Democratic Decline

For seven decades, the number of countries considered democratic grew. The average quality of these democracies — the fairness of elections, the rule of law and the like — also improved steadily.

That rise began to slow about 20 years ago, though. And beginning five or six years ago, [researchers have since found](#), the number of democracies in the world has shrunk for the first time since World War II.

Existing democracies are also [becoming less democratic](#), as well as more polarized and more prone to political dysfunction or outright breakdown.

Consider the rise of strongman rule in Hungary, the Philippines or Russia, [attacks on the courts](#) in Poland, [Hindu extremism in India](#), [fears of a power grab in Brazil](#).



Destroyed shops after communal violence in India's Madhya Pradesh State in April. Anindito Mukherjee for The New York Times

These may be especially severe cases, but they are vanguards to a global trend. So is the United States, which democracy monitors broadly describe as experiencing a sustained erosion.

Because wealthier countries are likelier to be democratic, they are likelier to be afflicted by this trend. This may speak to rising pessimism in those countries.

It may also help explain why, for Americans, it can feel as if the world as a whole were disintegrating.

For Americans who got to spend most of their lives in a safe and stable society, the shift to seemingly unending political crisis is destabilizing. It can make the world feel darker and more alarming, which might make far-off events feel scarier or more upsetting, too.

People naturally look for patterns in the world. Experience something once, especially if that experience is traumatic, and you will start to see it everywhere.

For Americans suddenly attuned to, say, domestic threats of election theft or civil unrest, similar events playing out overseas will suddenly feel much more visceral.

That can add up. A handful of far-off crises that Americans might've dismissed as unrelated to one another 30 years ago can, today, seem connected. It might even feel like proof of a global breakdown.

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